

## Cleveland: Success City in Promoting Public Office

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### PATHWAYS TO POWER: or The Yellow Brick Road to Emerald City

Is the big-city mayoralty a “stepping stone to higher ground” as the Reverend Jesse Jackson asserted when Chicago’s first African American mayor, Harold Washington, was elected, or is it as New York scholar Wallace Sayre declared in his famous “Sayre’s Law” a dead-end job whereby Gotham’s mayors “come from anywhere and go nowhere”?<sup>1</sup>

In seeking an answer to that question, I examined the upward political mobility of all of the mayors who served between 1820 and 1980 in the fifteen big cities. (The fifteen big cities were selected from those with the longest duration in the top fifteen population class for the period under study). In the search that includes 679 biographies found in the *Bibliographical Dictionary of American Mayors*, we find that Cleveland, with its seven “success” mayors, emerges as something of a nursery for growing national leaders. In second place is Detroit with five upward achievers, followed by San Francisco and Boston with four, and then Baltimore, New Orleans, and New York with three apiece, which covers the top half of the big cities studied. At the very bottom of the post-mayoral achievement scale are Buffalo, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles with a mere one each.<sup>2</sup>

#### Number of Upwardly Mobile Mayors in the Fifteen “Big Cities”

Cleveland, 7	New Orleans, 3	Milwaukee, 2
Detroit, 5	New York, 3	Chicago, 2
San Francisco, 4	Philadelphia, 2	Buffalo, 1
Boston, 4	St. Louis, 2	Cincinnati, 1
Baltimore, 3	Pittsburgh, 2	Los Angeles, 1

Since the fifteen cities are different in age, population size, and locations in the nation this leads to a series of questions such as, what bearing does the age of a city have on the production of national leaders via the mayor’s chair? Prime facie, it would seem obvious that the oldest cities should have a comparative advantage in that they have had more time to play

the political game and practice in producing political leaders. Yet, the answer seems to be in the negative, since the top four in success-producers – Cleveland, Detroit, San Francisco, and Boston – range in age from being relative juveniles to senior cities. By contrast, three of the oldest seaport cities, Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia, produced fewer upwardly mobile mayors. Thus, the age of the city seems to confer no advantage.

Another logical deduction might be that population size confers advantage, but that does not seem to be the case either. New York, the largest and one of the oldest, and her sister cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore (the latter two which ranked high in the big city population scales of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) were low in the production of politicians who leaped from city hall to national prominence and national office. It seems evident from the tables and the text that neither the age of the city, nor its population size carries much explanatory power in telling us why some cities are nurseries and breeding ground for upwardly mobile politicians while others function more like astronomers' black holes.

Other questions may occur to the student of American politics, for instance – did different urban political systems such as political machines provide a smoother climb for those clambering up the political ladder? Did, for example, Gotham's powerful Tammany machine in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and Chicago's and Pittsburgh's political machines in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century act as escalators that propelled mayors upward? Or was it cities with reformed systems such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Los Angeles that seemed to confer some advantage for the politically ambitious? To the extent that we can test the hypothesis, it appears that traditional patronage machines were not very helpful and could not unlock the door to upward movement. On the face of the numbers it even appears that they have been a hindrance. The nation's most powerful political organizations such as Tammany in New York, Kelly-Nash-Daley in Chicago, Lawrence in Pittsburgh, and Vare in Philadelphia were not exactly steam catapults for launching their mayors into upward ascent.<sup>3</sup> Cities with reformed political systems such as Cleveland, Detroit, and San Francisco appeared to do slightly better.<sup>4</sup>

To get a handle of the issue, I defined upward mobility as Joseph Schlesinger had in his benchmark study *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States*. Upward mobility in the political system is defined as attaining higher elective office, which is in turn related progressively to the size of the electoral district. Thus, upward progression would lead from city mayor to state governor or United States Senator, and then finally the big leap to the nation's White House. The electoral base measure is measured by the size of the electoral district, whereby the city has a population base exceeded by that of the state which in turn is exceeded by the nation (a U.S. House of Representatives district is smaller than the city and not in the upward progression scheme). The political opportunity ladder ascends upward from mayor to governor and senator and then to president. Schlesinger also defines appointments to offices such as presidential cabinet posts, Supreme Court justiceships, and important ambassadorships as upward mobility.<sup>5</sup>

The academic literature on political mobility includes the work of researchers such as

Marilyn Gittell, Theodore J. Lowi, Wallace Sayre, and synthesizer Raymond Wolfinger. These scholars who studied New York and other cities, all conclude pretty much, as Lowi put it that "Sayre's Law" was operative, which held that mayors in general (and New York mayors specifically) "come from anywhere and go nowhere." In short, the door to the mayor's office leads to a dead-end job. To underscore that point, Russell Murphy in his study quoted the lines from Dante's *Inferno*, which some thought should be posted above the mayor's door: "Abandon all hope ye who enter." In less elegant terms, Boston's rascal mayor, J. Michael Curley, simply concluded that mayoring was "fun and exciting, but there's no future in it."<sup>6</sup>

#### THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD: CLEVELAND

Upwardly Mobile Cleveland Mayors  
And office held after being mayor

Anthony Celebrezze, Sec. of Health, Education, Welfare
Frank Lausche, Ohio Governor; U.S. Senator
Harold H. Burton, U.S. Senator; U.S. Supreme Court
Newton D. Baker, Sec. of War
Thomas Burke, U.S. Senator
Harry L. Davis, Ohio Governor
Ralph S. Locher, Ohio Supreme Court

Of the fifteen big cities, Cleveland, Ohio led with the largest number of successful upward strivers: seven who made it to higher office after serving as mayor. The Lake City's mayoralty helped launch two mayors into high state office: Ralph Locher into the Ohio Supreme Court and Harry Davis into the governorship. In addition, five former Cleveland mayors entered national politics: Thomas Burke and Frank Lausche became United States Senators (Lausche also served five terms as governor before his move to Washington); Newton Baker and Anthony Celebrezze were appointed to presidential cabinet posts (Secretaries of War and Health, Education and Welfare respectively); and Harold Burton won a seat on the nation's highest court as an Associate Justice.<sup>7</sup>

The Lake City's mayoral achievers had different backgrounds from those in the Motor

City. Unlike Detroit, where four of the five upward succeeders were labeled reformers, only one of Cleveland's mayors, Newton Baker (a political successor to reformer Thomas L. Johnson), could be identified as a reformer by either contemporaries or later urban historians. Four of Cleveland's success mayors were Roman Catholics: Locher, Celebrezze, Burke, and Lausche. Two were foreign born, with Locher being born in Romania and Celebrezze in Italy; and if one includes Slovenian-American Lausche, three were of South and Eastern European heritages, as was a goodly portion of the city's voting population.<sup>8</sup>

The pathway to City Hall in Cleveland for its success mayors was also somewhat different from that of other cities. Five of the seven success mayors could have been said to have "inherited" their jobs: four including Baker, Burton, Burke and Locher held important prior offices (Law Director) that made them the next in the line of succession and moved them into the mayor's chair when the city leader moved up the political feeding-chain or out of City Hall. One (Celebrezze) had attracted so much attention in the Ohio legislature that when Mayor Burke ascended to the United States Senate, the Democrats named Celebrezze acting mayor, and he went on to win four re-elections.

Showing why five of the seven Cleveland success mayors got into office by succession, however, does not explain why they went higher in the political system, and why specifically Cleveland leads in this regard over other cities. Part of the answer may be the connection between the city and the state political systems. Ohio has excelled as a recruiting ground for national political leaders. Between the Civil War and 1920, seven Ohioans were elected to the presidency, ending with Harding's election in 1920. At the same time six Ohioans sat on the United States Supreme Court and two served as Chief Justices. Ohio also sent nineteen men to cabinet positions, and several of the state's politicians wielded substantial power in the national legislature, including John Sherman, George Pendleton, Marcus A. Hanna, and Joseph B. Foraker. "Not since the Virginia dynasty dominated national government during the early years of the Republic," historian R. Douglas Hurt notes, "had a state made such a mark on national political affairs."<sup>9</sup>

Ohioans dominated national politics for seventy years because Ohio was, to a large extent, a microcosm of the nation. Hurt writes that the elements of that microcosm were "the diversity of the people, the strength of the industrial and agricultural economy, and the balance between rural and urban populations." Further, he observes that "the individuals who played major roles in national affairs appealed to broad national constituencies because they learned their skills in Ohio, where political success required candidates to reconcile wide differences among the voters. Ohioans were northerners and southerners as well as easterners and westerners." Consequently, Ohio's politicians addressed constituencies that were the same as those across the nation," and were thus good choices for appointment to national office.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the pragmatic and centrist character of Ohio politics, Hurt asserts, has made it "job-oriented rather than issue-oriented," unlike Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota: the latter three are "issue-oriented states" at election time, and for the most part less attractive in

recruiting a national political leadership. In the Buckeye State, which is the "great Middle-class state," Hurt concludes that the "public tends to favor rectitude rather than reform."<sup>11</sup>

Another Midwestern political culture and contender for being a nationally representative state is Illinois. Although Illinois has also been labeled as a "cross section of America" by historian Cullom Davis and by pollsters as a "microcosm" of the nation and a "bellwether" in predicting voting trends, yet that national appeal of its urban politicians has been negated by Chicago's reputation as a "cloud city." Chicago, that "Sodom of the lakeshore," the hometown of Al Capone and machine politics, has erased whatever middle-America attractions Chicago might have had for national electorates. Unlike Cleveland, the Windy City's mayor's chair has not been a launching platform for high state or national office.<sup>12</sup>

Ohio's cities seemed to escape the virulent rural-urban split and profound distrust of city slickers prevalent in Illinois. It appears that there was much less anti big-city sentiment in the Buckeye State. For starters, Cleveland was never populous enough to dominate state politics, as was Chicago, which cast nearly one-half of the statewide presidential votes in 1948. Chicago was often the political tail that wagged the Illinois dog. That was not true in much smaller Cleveland, which had to share its urban status with many other mid-sized cities (e.g., Toledo and Cincinnati). The result was that outstaters, downstaters, and ruralites tended to view Cleveland as less of a political threat. Thus Ohio voters seemed less fearful of Cleveland and more likely to support city candidates for statewide office.

Insights into state political systems and their histories may provide answers for some of the questions raised about post-mayoral successes. Certainly Hurt's view of two different polities in the adjoining states of Ohio and Michigan is very helpful.<sup>13</sup> Ohio, with its non-ideological pragmatism, is also a description that suits six of its seven Cleveland success mayors. Michigan, with its issue-oriented polity, also influenced Detroit, where four of its five success mayors were labeled reformers in contrast to only one upwardly mobile leader from Cleveland. Detroit also had smaller windows of opportunity because it generally produced its national leaders at times of urban and national crises, when the times welcomed reformers. Yet crises are generally of short duration and do not take up much space on an historical time line. When political equilibrium returns, which it always does, and which is of longer historical duration, reformers are less attractive to national electorates. And since equilibriums have longer lives than crises, it follows that all things being equal, a city that produces centrist politicians would outstrip issue-oriented cities such as Detroit and generally win the upward-bound sweepstakes.<sup>14</sup>

Those factors, along with Ohio's miniature national electorate and Cleveland's political "promotion" system, offer some explanations for Cleveland's "success in producing upwardly mobile mayors." Finally, as government expert John Gargan in his essay the "Ohio Executive Branch" writes: "The mayoralty of a city has been the principle office from which several candidates have moved to nomination for governor" of Ohio.<sup>15</sup> George Voinovich is the most recent case in point.

Although these several factors help explain Cleveland's status as a "success city," critics might question the absence of other likely candidates from this analysis. Some might suggest, for example, that the party affiliation or narrow time frame encompassing most "successful" Cleveland mayors played a more important role in their mobility. These factors, however, have no explanatory value. As a study of 679 mayor biographies from the nation's fifteen largest cities between 1820 and 1980 shows, mayors from all parties including Federalist and Socialist experienced upward mobility. The same reasoning applies to time-frames. Thus neither party affiliation nor time frame provide an explanation for upward mobility in the universe of big-city mayors.<sup>16</sup>

Employing L. Frank Baum's metaphor from the *Wizard of Oz*, it was found that the "yellow brick road to Emerald City" led through Cleveland's City Hall. Cleveland turned out to be "success" city, sending more mayors to high public and national office than any other big city. Part of this success derived from Cleveland's city-political system and part from the political culture of the state of Ohio. This was evident in the state's political culture, which several scholars have argued was centrist, pragmatic, and representative of the nation at large to a point of being a miniature national electorate. The city-political system provided a regularized and almost-routine ladder of progression to mayor and high office. Without a strong machine, politics in Cleveland developed a pragmatic and centrist character, where the art of compromise paid political dividends and made Cleveland the lead city in promoting its mayors to higher public office.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jesse Jackson quoted in Anne Keegan, "Will Wise Words Outlast the Hot Ones?" *Chicago Tribune* 25 February 1983. For Sayre's law see Wallace S. Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, *Governing New York City* (New York: Norton, 1965), 686-87. The chapter subtitle and text references to the "yellow brick road to Emerald City" come from L. Frank Baum's *Journey Through Oz: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (New York: Derrydale Books, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> The cutoff date for measuring upward mobility corresponds to that of the *Biographical Dictionary of American Mayors, 1820-1980s* eds. Melvin G. Holli, Peter d'A. Jones (West Port, Ct.: Greenwood, 1981). Thus, Baltimore's success mayors do not count William D. Schaefer nor does Cleveland count George Voinovich who became governors of their states after that date.

<sup>3</sup> For a convenient summary and references list of reformed and un-reformed cities see Alan DiGaetano, "Urban Political Reform: Did It Kill The Machine?" *Journal of Urban History* 18, no. 1 (November 1991): 43, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Erie, *Rainbow's End: Irish Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 1, 9, 14, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph A. Schlesinger, *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966), 2-5, 195-197; Melvin Holli, "Mayoring in Chicago, 1837-1987: A Stepping Stone to Higher Office or a Dead-end Job?" in *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition* eds. Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 243.

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn Gittell, "Metropolitan Mayor: Dead End," *Public Administrator Review* 23 (March 1963): 20-24; Theodore J. Lowi, "Why Mayors Go Nowhere," *Washington Monthly* 3 (January 1972): 55-60; Sayre and Kaufman, *Governing New York City*, 697; Raymond Wolfinger, *The Politics of Progress* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 397-401. Dante quoted p. 289 and Curley quoted p. 277 in Russell Murphy, "Whither the Mayors: A Note on Mayoral Careers," *Journal of Politics* 42 (February 1980). See also Harold Wolman, Edward Page, and Martha Reavley, "Mayors and Mayoral Careers," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 25 (March 1990): 502.

<sup>7</sup> For careers see entries in the *Biographical Dictionary of American Mayors*.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Curtin, "The Lausche Era, 1945-1957," in Alexander P. Lamis ed. *Ohio Politics* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1944), 42-58.

<sup>9</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, "Ohio: Gateway to the Midwest," in James H. Madison, ed. *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 216.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-217.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>12</sup> Cullom Davis, "Illinois: Crossroads and Cross Section," in *Heartland*, 129, 153; Holli, "Mayoring in Chicago," 254. Jon C. Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland: the Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 199-200. See also Dave Emerson, "Illinois A Bellwether?" in *Almanac of Illinois Politics* (Springfield, IL: Illinois Issues, 1990), 1-5.

<sup>13</sup> Hurt, "Ohio: Gateway to the Midwest," 220.

<sup>14</sup> For additional information on differing state political culture see Neal Pierce and John Keefe, *The Great Lakes States of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 16, 17, 197f. and John Fenton, *Midwest Politics* (New York: Rinehart, Winston, 1966), 3, 9, 115. For equilibrium politics see Melvin G. Holli, "Political Equilibrium and the Daley Eras in Chicago" in *Continuity* (winter 1998).

<sup>15</sup> John J. Gargan, "The Ohio Executive Branch," in *Ohio Politics*, 260. For Chicago's "clout" in state politics see Peter Colby and Paul M. Green, "Downstate...Shrinking Chicago Clout," in *Illinois Issues* special edition (Springfield, IL: Illinois Issues, 1982), 3.u

<sup>16</sup> *Biographical Dictionary of American Mayors*, eds. Holli and Jones.

The tables "Number of Upwardly Mobile Mayors in the Fifteen "Big Cities" and "Upwardly Mobile Cleveland Mayors and office held after being mayor" derive from Melvin Holli's book *The American Mayor: The Best and Worst Big City Leaders* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), 153, 161.